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U.S. TO OPEN TALKS WITH NEW ZEALAND ON NUCLEAR POLICY

Wellington Official Will Bring
Proposal to Washington —
Skepticism Is Voiced

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 — The United States and New Zealand have agreed to hold high-level talks next week to determine if the yearlong rupture in the Pacific alliance over nuclear policy can be repaired, Administration officials said today.

They said Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger would hold meetings with Geoffrey Palmer, New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister, on Thursday and Friday in Washington.

According to New Zealand officials, Mr. Palmer, who is also the Attorney General, is carrying a confidential plan drafted by the ruling Labor Party that could open the way to ending the rift that has paralyzed the 34-year-old Anzus alliance of Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Some Skepticism in Washington

Administration officials said they are interested in seeing the plan, but several of them doubt it will go far enough to resolve the split in the alliance.

This will be the highest-level meeting, however, between the two countries since the United States suspended all military exercises with New Zealand and cut off exchange of intelligence information with its long-time and close ally. Administration officials said Mr. Palmer's visit is viewed as crucial because if the Labor Party plan fails to end the rift, the United States would consider ending all its formal security obligations to come to New Zealand's aid in case of a military emergency.

The nuclear dispute has been taken seriously in Washington because of concern that if the United States did not

respond vigorously, the antinuclear policy of New Zealand could spread to Europe.

Rift Began Last Winter

The rift developed last winter when Prime Minister David Lange, who was elected in July 1984, carried out a Labor Party antinuclear election pledge and refused port entry to an American Navy destroyer, the Buchanan, on the ground that he could not be sure if it was carrying nuclear weapons. Mr. Lange had ordered a ban on all nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed ships in New Zealand waters.

It is standard American policy never to say if a particular ship is carrying nuclear arms. And Washington refused in the case of the Buchanan to confirm or deny if nuclear arms were aboard.

As a result of the incident, the United States canceled all maneuvers with New Zealand set this year, suspended the flow of intelligence information and publicly attacked the Wellington Government for not fulfilling the obligations of an ally. And with the agreement of Australia's Labor Government, the United States canceled the annual meeting of the Anzus alliance,

which was set for Canberra two months ago.

Administration officials said Mr. Lange's Labor Party lost a recent local election in Timaru, an area in which his party had prevailed for 58 years. The reason for the setback was primarily New Zealand's soaring inflation and interest rates, officials and New Zealand Embassy aides said. But a recent poll also showed that support for the Anzus alliance and the United States had risen from 61 percent to 71 percent in the last year, despite the strains in relations.

According to New Zealand sources, Mr. Lange is trying to allow more flexibility into the antinuclear policy without renouncing it.

He is faced with two irreconcilable positions — the strong left wing of his party, which is determined not to relax the firm antinuclear policy, and the population as a whole, which while not antagonistic to that policy, gives high priority to good relations with the United States, an Administration official said. With general elections due in two years, Mr. Lange is viewed here as trying to be seen as having repaired the rift with Washington.

Legislation has been drafted by his party for introduction next year, and a draft of it is being carried to Washington by Mr. Palmer. A New Zealand official said the main difference between the current situation and the one that existed last winter is that Mr. Lange is now not ruling out in advance visits by

ships that are "nuclear capable," but only those that are deemed to be carrying such weapons.

In a news conference last week in Wellington, Mr. Lange was asked how his Government could tell if a ship that was capable of carrying nuclear arms actually had any if the United States refused to say.

"From the best advice we have to us," he replied, "from our consultations with our defense personnel, and all other evidence."

He added, however, that the New Zealand Government was not deviating from its commitment to keep New Zealand free of nuclear weapons.

A high-level American official said today that "it appears that Lange is trying to move toward restoration of port access, along the lines of the policy followed by Norway and Denmark."

Both of those North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies have policies of barring nuclear weapons except in time of war, but of not raising questions about American ships that call on their ports.

He said, however, that the United States believes that it would be a mistake for Mr. Lange to go ahead with antinuclear legislation.

Bernard Kalb, the State Department spokesman, said, "We will wait to see what Deputy Prime Minister Palmer brings."

"We continue to believe that restoration of port access is essential to the allied relationship with New Zealand," he said.